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Response Paper, selections from *In Our Time*

Throughout the prescribed selections from Ernest Hemingway’s In Our Time, we are faced with the entity of death and how it is able to mold the characters into something different from the people they were before they came to know it. This change is most conspicuous in characters that go to war, but we also come across characters whose paths lead them to see the ubiquity of death in ways unexpected to them. The encounter with death causes both familial and romantic relationships to take on new lights, generally creating a distance between the members. Despite its universality, though, for the characters of *In Our Time*, what is comprehensively lacking is, in fact, a comprehension of death.

Of all the effects brought upon the characters in its wake, the sheer unfathomability of death is the most evident. The soldiers of Chapter III see death happening for their compatriots as they each climb over the wall, and yet appear surprised when it happens to them, in the same manner. There is no change in the pattern, and all logic would present that by doing the same thing over and over again, one should expect the same results. While the assumption of immortality when death has just been presented before you does not make sense in terms of cause and effect, it does makes sense in terms of the emotional processing of the death of others. The soldiers of Chapter III take this course of action, as does a young Nick in “Indian Camp.” In order to continue existing, death must be viewed as an isolated incident. The women who cannot let go of their deceased babies in “On the Quai at Smyrna” also experience the unexpected suddenness of death, but are left with the reminders on which to dwell. The women appear to feel almost instinctively attached to their young, who seem to have ended their lives just as quickly as they began them. The joy of a child is replaced by death before many of the mothers can understand or accept how something so recently gained was so quickly lost. There is a distinction here though, in that their sense of grief may be heightened by the perceived inability of the women to protect their young. Because the death Nick witnesses is not of someone emotionally tied to him, it isolates him but does not overwhelm him. This ties back to the importance of the fact that Nick first learns of death as suicide; for him, this insinuates that death is a choice to be made, and by simply choosing not to die, it is evitable. However, in all three of these cases, despite their naiveté – or just their sheer will to believe otherwise -- its inevitability cannot be escaped.

Though there is a lack of intimacy in most of the relationships explored in the novel, the experience of death appears to magnify a sense of isolation. From the selections read, the only depiction of Nick and Marjorie’s relationship is when he is breaking up with her. We do not see any connections Nick makes, only ones he dissevers. We also can see Krebs’s perspective change in “Soldier’s Home.” Even in Germany, admittedly a place he liked, he describes a picture of the Rhines that displays people that never seem quite right, and does not actually capture the river at all (72, 69). There is no beauty in this picture. Krebs no longer feels able to love anybody, and when he tells his mother he loves her in order to console her he is conscious of his conviction that it is still a lie (76-77). We view these characters as outside of their relationships, and detached from their surroundings. This isolation is underscored over the sense of disconnect between married couples like those in “Cat in the Rain” and “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot,” who seemingly have not experienced war or death; for the latter, the issue is glazed over, and these people are free to focus instead on material things, cats or girlfriends. The only exception to these relationship strains is Nick’s connection to his father. Through the bonding flow of masculinity, the father-son relationship seems glorified. In “Indian Camp,” the Indian father who commits suicide becomes a strengthener in the relationship between Nick and his father. They are the invincible ones because they are strong; the Indian man experiences death because he is weak, and “couldn’t stand things” (19). His newborn son’s frailty – being, as a baby, out of touch with masculinity -- means he cannot take anything from the experience either. Regarding Nick and his father, this is the only instance in which death has not led to some sort of vast despair, though this should not be interpreted as any more heightened clarity of the situation. If the journey spun in *In Our Time* reveals anything, it is that death eventually places its hands on us all, and yet touches each of us differently.

Open-Ended Question:

In what other ways do you think the constant reminder of mortality affects the relationships we have with other people?